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DRAFT MEMO FOR THE DCI
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SUBJECT: Possible Consequence of Current Developments in Thailand

SUMMARY

Sarit appears to be making a determined effort, by a combination of parliamentary tactics and military moves, to curtail the power of Phao and to achieve a dominant position in the government. We believe the chances are considerably better than even that Sarit's efforts will succeed. The most likely outcome will be a reshuffled or reconstituted government under Phibun in which Sarit men will be dominant and the Phao faction will lose most of its positions of authority, although Phao will retain his post as chief of police. We believe the chances are less than even that Sarit will resort to force to achieve his goals but if there is a military showdown, Sarit and his army faction would probably win. An effort to completely eliminate Phibun and Phao from authority and to bring in a new power grouping based on a Sarit-Khuang alliance would probably result in violence. If Phibun remains as prime minister, we do not believe there will be any significant change, at least for the short run, in Thai-US relations. A new government excluding Phibun would probably reflect Sarit's Thai-centric attitudes in its foreign policy, but we do not believe there would be any immediate decisive change in Thai-US relations.

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1. During the past several days, Field Marshal Sarit, Commander in Chief of the Thai army, has made a series of political moves indicative of a serious effort to change the Thai government by parliamentary means, and, failing that, perhaps of an army coup attempt. By 12 September, according to reports, approximately 92 first category (appointed) members of the Thai National Assembly, led by Sarit and including many of the numerous high ranking military officers in the Assembly, had defected from the government and 1947 coup group party, the Seri-Manangkhasila (SMP).¹ It is also reported that Sarit has demanded the resignation of Prime Minister Phibun and his entire cabinet.

2. The stakes in the present conflict are primarily a redistribution of the sources of power and revenue accruing to those in control of the government. Sarit's motives appear to be, at the least, to curtail the power of his arch-rival, Police Director General Phao, and, probably, to consolidate the supremacy over the government which he and his followers achieved during and immediately after the confusion accompanying the February 1957 elections for the non-appointive members of the Assembly. During the post-election

* Reports as to the exact numbers of SMP defectors are conflicting. At this point, 92 is the maximum figure reported, but we believe it likely that the figure is reasonably accurate. This group of 92 would hold the balance of power in the 283 seat Assembly because their votes combined with those of the approximately 163 members of opposition parties of the first category (elected) assemblymen provides the necessary strength for a vote of no-confidence. Furthermore, it is likely that some SMP members of the first category may also defect.

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turmoil, Sarit and his clique probably had the power to remove Phao from authority and in view of the long-term Sarit-Phao rivalry it was somewhat surprising that he did not do so. This may have been due to Sarit's reluctance to resort to illegal and unconstitutional measures, to his respect for Phibun, or to Phibun's successful manipulation of the personalities and factions involved. Whatever the reasons, Phao, with the aid and protection of Phibun, whose principal basis of strength has been an ability to maintain a relative balance between the Sarit and Phao factions, was allowed an opportunity to stage a comeback from the low point his political fortunes had reached following the elections. Since the elections, feelings between Sarit and Phao have apparently grown more bitter, and Sarit seems to have lost considerable confidence in Phibun's intentions.

3. In early August, Phibun announced that all cabinet members with business holdings would have to resign from their ministries or give up their businesses. Sarit, apparently under some pressure, resigned as Minister of Defense and immediately began to agitate for the resignations of Phao, who was Minister of Interior, and Phao's father-in-law, General Phin, who was Minister of Agriculture. Phao and Phin finally resigned from the cabinet on September 12 when the pressure, created in large part by the mass defection of Sarit followers from the SMP, became acute.

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4. The resignations of Phao and Phin may placate Sarit and his followers to some extent and make it more difficult for Sarit to hold his faction in line in any effort to upset the present government. However, Sarit has laid considerable political and military groundwork to turn out the present Phibun government by parliamentary means, and we believe he will continue his effort to do so. The present Assembly session is scheduled to close September 22, and we believe Sarit's parliamentary effort is likely to reach a climax before that date.

5. At this point, we believe the chances are considerably better than even that Sarit's combined parliamentary-military maneuvers to change the government and reduce Phao's political position will succeed. If the effort fails, we believe the chances are less than even that Sarit will resort to force, although he will probably be under considerable pressure to do so from his followers. The King, with whom Sarit retains close relations, has reportedly counseled against the use of force; Phibun, who, we believe, still has considerable influence on Sarit, will undoubtedly attempt to avoid violence; and Sarit himself has in the past demonstrated his reluctance to push his advantage to the point of a military showdown and possible bloodshed. However, if Phao makes the first overtly aggressive move, Sarit would probably retaliate. Phao is capable of a desperate move, such as a series of selective assassinations. The event most likely

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to cause him to make such a move would probably be an attempt to remove him as chief of police and to eliminate his influence in the national police forces. On the other hand, a uniquely Thai solution to the present situation would be for Phao to absent himself from the country for an extended study tour or period of rest.

6. We believe there are three basic possibilities in the present situation. They are given below in descending order of probability.

A) Phibun may remain as prime minister but with Sarit and his followers dominating the government. Phao and his followers would lose most of their positions of authority, although Phao would continue as chief of police. This type of development could come about through a general reorganization of the present cabinet or the organization of a new government following a resignation of the present Phibun government.

B) The Phibun government may be forced to resign and a new government formed excluding Phibun. In this case, Sarit would be clearly in power and Sarit men would hold all key positions in the cabinet. We do not believe Sarit would assume the position of prime minister himself, but he would select a man acceptable to Phibun making it possible for Phibun to retire gracefully. Likely candidates are Worakan Bancha, a non-military man generally associated with Sarit and currently

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Minister of Finance, and General Prapat Charusathien, an able Sarit man who was until recently Deputy Minister of Interior and who, according to reports, is well regarded by Phibun. Either of these men would be a front for Sarit. In such a situation, Phao would probably continue as chief of police, but Sarit men would occupy key positions in the police to keep an eye on Phao's activities and to channel the greatest part of revenues flowing through police channels into the Sarit faction coffers.

C) It is also possible that the present situation represents a complete rupture of the 1947 coup group and the development of a new governing coalition of Sarit's army faction and civilian groups including the royalists and Khuang Aphaiwong's Democrat Party. There have been reports suggesting a widening rift between Phibun, Phao and the followers of Pridi on the one hand and Sarit, Khuang, and the Palace on the other, based on differing attitudes toward the monarchy, Communism, and corruption. In such a case, Khuang might be made prime minister. Phao would almost certainly be removed as chief of police and the entire police force purged of pro-Phao men. Phao, with Phibun's help, would almost certainly attempt to forestall this development by any means at their disposal. Although we do not believe Sarit will push Phibun and Phao so far as to risk violence, if he does, we believe the chances are better than even that Sarit and his army following would win out in a test of military strength.

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7. If Phibun remains as prime minister, even as a front man for Sarit, we do not believe there will be any significant change, at least for the short run, in Thai-US relations. If Phibun is excluded from the cabinet under conditions outlined in alternative B or C above, Sarit's proclivities as a Thai-centric would probably be reflected in Thai foreign policy and attitudes toward the US. However, we do not believe there would be any abrupt decisive change in US-Thai relations.

8. In any event, we believe the following estimate in NIE 62-57* remains valid. "Thailand's leaders will continue to modify their past policy of unequivocal alignment with the US and will probably seek to develop a more flexible foreign policy, particularly with respect to relations with Communist China. The Thai leaders will probably continue to tolerate unofficial contacts with Communist China and will probably enter into some official commercial and cultural contacts as well. However, we believe Thailand will not recognize the Peiping regime during the next year or so unless Communist China is admitted to the UN."

* NIE 62-57, 18 June 1957, Probable Developments in Thailand.